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## *Sociological Perspectives on Deviance*

### *Functionalist Perspective*

#### **Functionalist Perspective**

According to functionalists, deviance is a common part of human existence, with positive as well as negative consequences for social stability. Deviance helps to define the limits of proper behavior. Children who see one parent scold the other for belching at the dinner table learn about approved conduct. The same is true of the driver who receives a speeding ticket, the department store cashier who is fired for yelling at a customer, and the college student who is penalized for handing in papers weeks overdue.

**1-Sociologist Kai Erikson (1966)** illustrated the boundary-maintenance function of deviance in his study of the Puritans of 17th-century New England. By today's standards, the Puritans placed tremendous emphasis on conventional morals. Their persecution and execution of women as witches represented a continuing attempt to define and redefine the boundaries of their community. In effect, their changing social norms created crime waves, as people whose behavior was previously acceptable suddenly faced punishment for being deviant.

**2-Durkheim** ([1897] 1951) introduced the term anomie into sociological literature to describe the loss of direction felt in a society when social control of individual behavior has become ineffective. Anomie is a state of normlessness that typically occurs during a period of profound social change and disorder, such as a time of economic collapse. People become more aggressive or depressed, which results in higher rates of violent crime and suicide. Since there is much less agreement on what constitutes proper behavior during times of revolution, sudden prosperity, or economic depression, conformity and obedience become less significant as social forces. It also becomes much more difficult to state exactly what constitutes deviance.

#### **3-Merton's Theory of Deviance**

What happens to individuals in a society with a heavy emphasis on wealth as a basic symbol of success? Merton reasoned that people adapt in certain ways, either by conforming to or by deviating from such cultural expectations. His anomie theory of deviance posits five basic forms of adaptation (Table 1).(+)

<i>Mode</i>	<i>Institutionalized Means (hard work)</i>	<i>Societal Goal (acquisition of wealth)</i>
<i>Nondeviant</i>		
<i>Conformity</i>	<i>Accept (+)</i>	<i>Accept (+)</i>
<i>Deviant</i>		
<i>Innovation</i>	<i>Reject (-)</i>	<i>Accept (+)</i>
<i>Ritualism</i>	<i>Accept (+)</i>	<i>Reject (-)</i>
<i>Retreatism</i>	<i>Reject (-)</i>	<i>Reject (-)</i>
<i>Rebellion</i>	<i>Replace with new means (+-)</i>	<i>Replace with new goals (+-)</i>

**a-Conformity** to social norms, the most common adaptation in Merton's typology, is the opposite of deviance. It involves acceptance of both the overall societal goal ("become affluent") and the approved means ("work hard"). In Merton's view, there must be some consensus regarding accepted cultural goals and the legitimate means for attaining them. Without such a consensus, societies could exist only as collectives of people rather than as unified cultures, and might experience continual chaos.

The other four types of behavior represented in Table 1 all involve some departure from conformity

**b- The "innovator"** accepts the goals of society but pursues them with means that are regarded as improper.

**c-the "ritualist"** has abandoned the goal of material success and become compulsively committed to the institutional means. Work becomes simply a way of life rather than a means to the goal of success.

**d-The "retreatist,"** as described by Merton, has basically retreated (or withdrawn) from both the goals and the means of society.

**Retreatism** Someone who adapts in this way rejects both the cultural goals and the institutional means for achieving them, but does not replace them with alternatives. Merton gave examples such as vagrants, alcoholics and drug addicts. (retreated (or withdrawn) from both the goals and the means of society)

**e-The "rebel"** feels alienated from the dominant means and goals and may seek a dramatically different social order.

**Rebellion** involves the abandonment of both the cultural goals and the institutional means. Substitutes are put forward for both elements. Merton saw rebellion as a collective activity, rather than an individual one.